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# BIAS AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES IN TELEVISION COVERAGE OF WAR

Kerry Mallett

*In my paper, I sought to research and analyze how bias and coverage changed in television war coverage from the late 1930s until modern day. One focus was on how changing technology affected media reach and engagement and how coverage of the battlefield changed from propaganda to having no filter. By analyzing political climates during the wars and conflicts considered—World War II, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan—I found that government is often the agenda setter and censors what information gets through to the public, thus changing how the public perceives the war. In my research, I found that bias is not a modern concept; it is something that has existed in television coverage of war since its inception.*

Since its invention, the television has been a prime instrument to transmit moving images, along with sound, to millions of people. This has changed virtually every aspect of society and has affected the way that journalists cover wars. Prior to television, the likes of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer used yellow journalism to edit photos and employ sensationalism in conflicts to sell newspapers. The television did not remove sensationalism from the field of journalism, but complicated it. Not only could footage be sparingly used or edited to show one side, broadcasters' tones and script could be modified to frame an issue or perpetuate a certain idea. From World War II to the Vietnam and the Gulf War to the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, war coverage has developed in terms of the kind and type of coverage, but issues of bias and framing still persist in various levels.

Melodrama and patriotism were main themes in newsreels during World War II. Newsreels, commonly shown before a feature movie at a movie theater, were one of the primary ways in which Americans received updates on the war in Europe and Asia. Often created with triumphant music and a narrator who promotes American victory and ideals, these newsreels allowed Americans to see moving footage of the warfront for the first time but were propaganda-like in nature. For example, in a United News newsreel from June 1944, the program covers the invasion of Normandy on D-Day. However, the footage only shows Allied troops advancing their position, it does not show wounded or killed soldiers or the Germans fighting back. This one-perspective type of video is typical from this time. The narrator's script enhances this singular perspective, as he recaps, "German prisoners were taken almost at once. American and British aircraft supported the shock troops magnificently, preventing the

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Germans from marshaling reinforcements."<sup>1</sup> This editorializing and emphasis on American and Allied power was created to help emphasize pride on the home front, but it detracts from the legitimacy of the journalism at work.

While this coverage was carefully packaged to be broadcast at home, not all World War II coverage was sterile. CBS newsman's Edward R. Murrow, who started in radio and ended his career in television, famously broadcast from London and described the German's bombing of the city. With his famous "This is London" starting phrase, Murrow revealed the horror and destruction of the city through a first-person perspective. In a broadcast from September 13, 1940, he reports:

*The silence is almost harder to bear. One becomes accustomed to rattling windows and the distant sound of bombs and then there comes a silence that can be felt. You know*

*the sound will return—you wait, and then it starts again. The waiting is bad. It gives you a chance to imagine things.*<sup>2</sup>

This coverage was important because it signifies honest, but well constructed coverage of war. Murrow is not manipulated by a political agenda, nor is he trying to keep American spirits high at home by using propaganda and saying that they are winning the war. Through a candid, thoughtful explanation of observations, Murrow ensures that information is not distorted through his broadcast.

By contrast, the Vietnam War, the nation's "first televised war", was not sterile; coverage showed Americans dropping bombs and actively fighting the war. Besides the developments of Agent Orange and other weapons, the type of fighting in Vietnam did not differ much from previous wars. People at home did not originally see the gore of Vietnam, but

as the war progressed the images changed. CBS broadcasted coverage of Marines torching the village of Cam Ne and the media's spin on the Tet Offensive worsened the political climate during the war.<sup>3</sup> Some politicians believed that the country lost the war because it was televised. After Lyndon Johnson announced he would not seek a second term as president, he said at a meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters that if past wars had been televised, public opinion would be very different of those wars too.

No one can say exactly what effect those vivid scenes have on American opinion. Historians must only guess at the effect that television would have had during earlier conflicts on the future of this Nation: during the Korean war, for example, at the time when our forces were pushed back there to Pusan; or World War II, the Battle of the Bulge, or when our men were slugging it out in Europe or when most of our Air Force

was shot down that day in June 1942 off Australia.<sup>4</sup>

However, Frank Russo did research and found that NBC and CBS, the two biggest networks during the Vietnam War, did not have bias against the Nixon Administration during 1969 or 1970.<sup>5</sup>

While it is true that the public was not exposed to the horrors of war in the media during World War II, the Vietnam War's media coverage is not significant just because of this, but because this aspect, combined with the major protests, burning of draft cards, and social movements happening at the time, made for a different type of national mindset. Protestors were further angered by the seemingly irrefutable images that were shown on the evening news every night and used these to justify their protest. However, in "Vietnam: The Television War," Michael Mandelbaum writes that while public opinion eventually determined American policy in Vietnam, it had little influence between 1954 and

1965.<sup>6</sup> This is in part because the biggest atrocities and scandals of the war, like the My Lai massacre, had yet to occur. The My Lai massacre occurred in 1968 and was uncovered by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh and published in 1969. It came at a time where campus uprisings were happening and public trust in American success at Vietnam was at an all-time low, so this atrocity and the visual coverage of it really swayed public opinion of the war and disillusioned many concerning the United States government and troops. Also, a study by Elmo Roper and Associates throughout the 1960s showed that television was the primary source of news for Americans and the most trusted news source.<sup>7</sup> The Vietnam War's television coverage is significant because it is the first to show first-hand the cruelties of war, and thus really changed public opinion. This differed greatly from World War II because it was no longer working with government interests but working against them.

After the disaster in the media and the impact on public opinion during Vietnam, the federal government, especially President George H.W. Bush and the Pentagon were careful in the information disseminated from Iraq during the Gulf War in the early 1990s. They relied on prior restraint and limited access to information for reporters in Iraq to attain their goal. Reporters were allowed to attend briefings every day that had maps and videos for their use, but civilian casualties were never mentioned in these meetings, but smart bombs were emphasized.<sup>8</sup> Some reporters were allowed to travel to the battlefield to write dispatches, but their work was reviewed for security breaches afterward and released after their newsworthiness diminished.<sup>9</sup> A study done by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst found that "the more [Americans at home] watched TV, the less they knew about the history of

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the conflict, politics or the region.”<sup>10</sup> Tight control by the Bush administration and a consequential lack of knowledge from the American people about what was actually happening in Iraq characterized the Gulf War’s coverage.

One of the most notable changes in the media with the advent of the Internet and 24-hour news in the 1990s and early 2000s was the “CNN effect”, which is the “power of news media to shape government decision-making in respect to international affairs.”<sup>11</sup> This power is a precarious one, as previously the relationship was one-sided—the news reported government policy; it did not affect it. The polarization of television news, which will be discussed shortly, contributed to this so-called “CNN effect.” Another important aspect that CNN brought to television news was the concept of the 24-hour news cycle. The ability to access news coverage, which was very repetitive, but could be interrupted for breaking news at any hour vastly changed the way Americans consumed news.<sup>12</sup> This format allowed for more commentators and analysts who were much less objective than the traditional news anchor. It also created viewers who were increasingly woefully misinformed. *The San Diego Union Tribune* reported results of a poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes that said 52% of Americans believed evidence was found linking Iraq to September 11, 35% believed weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq and 56% believed majority world opinion supported the war. Fox viewers were the top for believing all three, as 45% of Fox viewers believed all three misperceptions, compared to 12 to 15 percent for other networks.<sup>13</sup> In another study, Tim Groeling of the University of California compared Fox’s *Special Report*, ABC’s *World News*, the *CBS Evening News* and the *NBC Nightly News* “in their portrayal of public opinion regarding the president.”<sup>14</sup> Groeling

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analyzed the probability that each of these networks would broadcast an internal poll result and NBC, CBS and ABC had similarly trending polls while Fox had polls trending the opposite way (see Figure 1). The coverage of Fox and the other networks thus varied, causing more polarization in television news. This practice helped develop the dynamic of polarized news because these specialists and analysts were more easily able to promote the views of a certain party or faction. It is this polarization that characterizes the coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

These developments vastly affected the way that the September 11 attacks and ensuing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were covered by the media. The importance of television news cannot be overstated, as many surveys indicated that television news was the most used and trusted news source

for people in the United States and Great Britain during the Iraq War.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this skewed coverage had a crucial impact on how people perceived the war. This is also the period where Fox News topped CNN as the top-rated news channel. This can likely be attributed to the polarizing viewpoints of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the partisan coverage by Fox News attracted those who supported the Bush Administration’s decision to invade the countries.<sup>16</sup> This partisan approach to the news was part of a larger trend of framing the story to fit what the partisan network wanted to communicate to the viewer. One example of this framing is the coverage of the tearing down of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square. What was broadcast on television (several times over, due to the nature of the 24-hour news cycle) was a zoomed-in view of what

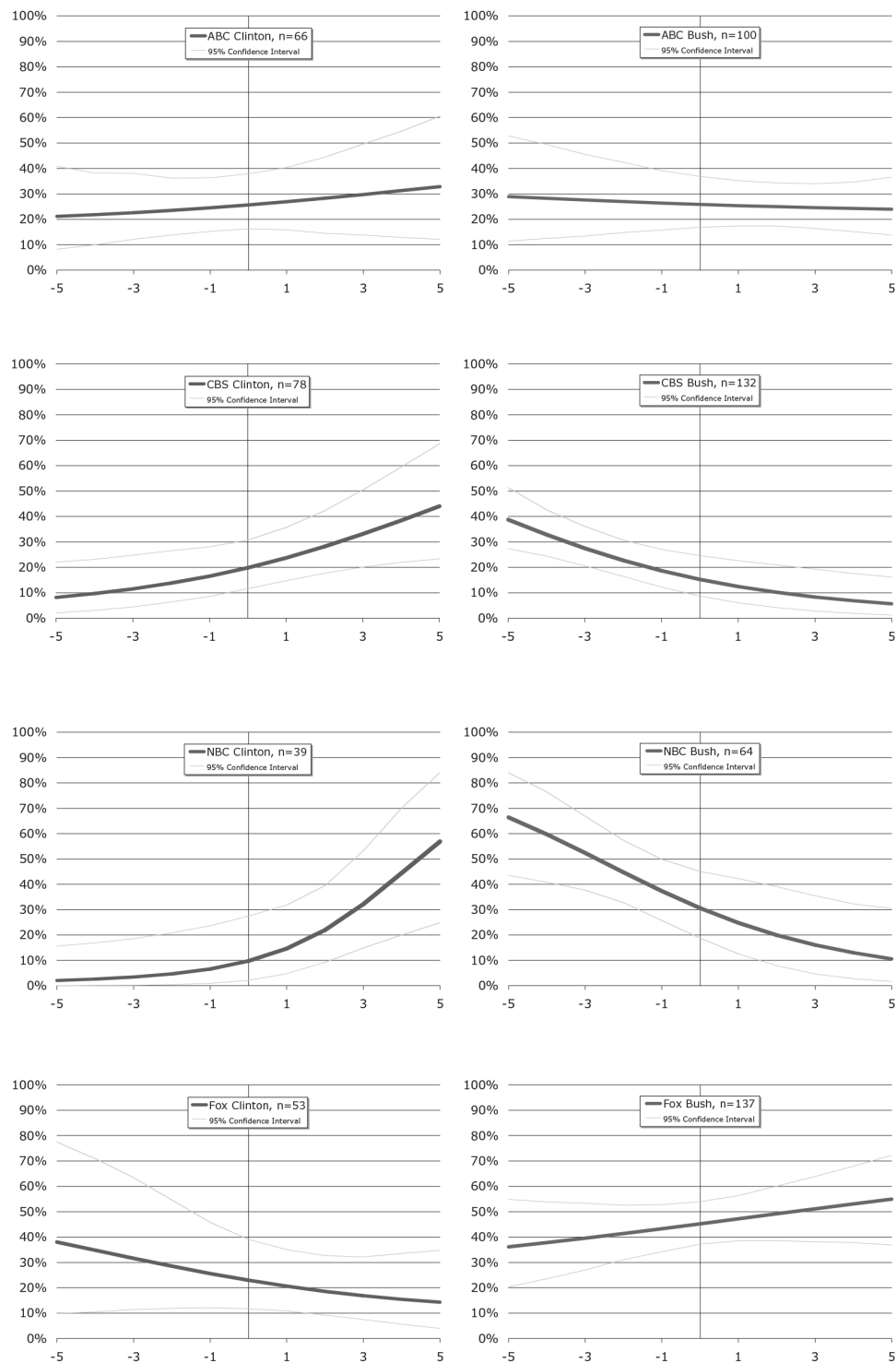


Figure 1. Basic Model Predicted Probability of Broadcasting an Internal Poll Result, by Network, President, and Poll Difference<sup>19</sup>

appeared to be a crowd of Iraqis tearing down a statue of the dictator. However, as was later revealed and discussed in “The New Yorker”, this square was actually in an area where many foreign journalists were staying while covering the conflict and the statue was ultimately brought down by a United States marine vehicle that had a crane on it.<sup>17</sup> United States news companies, many under the thumb of the government, were eager to show what appeared to be a collective protest by the Iraqi people. Government officials even commented on the supposed success of the protest. For example, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters, “the scenes of free Iraqis celebrating in the streets, riding American tanks, tearing down the statues of Saddam Hussein in the center of Baghdad are breathtaking. Watching them, one cannot help but think of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain.”<sup>18</sup> With so much American opposition to the conflict, it is easy to understand why politicians and the news were eager to show an apparent victory for the nation. However, this framing brought to light how news organizations would alter the meaning or context of an event in the war in order to change public opinion.

Many people complain about the current climate of the news, with its polarization and skewed coverage, but they do not realize that this is an old phenomenon, especially when concerning war coverage. The government, news organizations under the thumb of the government or news organizations with a political agenda have manipulated images and framed stories of the fight overseas to convey a certain idea or message to viewers. This happened in World War II with the propagandistic newsreels, continued in Vietnam with traumatizing images being broadcast to the public and continues today with framing from embeds or of events occurring in the Middle East. The media

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dependency theory describes how in times of crisis, people rely more heavily on the news and thus are relying on coverage that is inherently biased and manipulated. This has a profound effect on public opinion of a war or conflict and can change history. Television coverage has developed through new technologies, but its way of covering war from 70 years ago to today has stayed essentially the same at the roots.



# 3D & SCULPTURE





## RED TOY

Jonelle Jerwick

This piece combines a female torso and toy trumpet in a dramatized pose. It is painted a cartoonish red to highlight the plasticized and objective view contemporary society has on the female body and sexuality.



## JAMAICA CIGAR BOX UKULELE

**Bob Mason**

This piece is the most recent addition to a collection of cigar box instruments I have made since I first learned the basics in high school. All of its parts were made from scratch or recycled (its title comes from the box brand name). The only planned parts of the design were the F-style sound holes. As I decorated with a wood-burner, stain, and only two paint colors, these bits converged into an antique look which has received a lot of attention. I am very pleased with the final product, and will certainly continue my work with the success of this ukulele in mind.



## YUPO LAMP

**Shannon Varcoe**

This piece was created out of laser cut synthetic paper with a poplar wood structure. The paper was cut into long strips of different weights that would fall and bend into forms through which light could follow. It was an interesting opportunity to experiment with light, shadows and a new sculpting material. This was a project for Three-Dimensional Design Foundations course with Heather Ramsdale.



# UNTITLED

## Jonelle Jerwick

This sculpture was created using an additive and subtractive process. The base piece was carved away in a fluid continuous form. The smaller triangular pieces were cast and added to create tension.

